

VZCZCXYZ0217
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHEG #1258/01 1701525
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181525Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9590
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY 0335
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 0154
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY 1192
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 1721
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1194
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1322
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 1030
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0389

C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 001258

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, PRM/AFR
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/10/2018
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT'S APPROACH ON ERITREAN ASYLUM-SEEKERS

REF: A. SECSTATE 64810
[1](#)B. ASMARA 324
[1](#)C. CAIRO 1231
[1](#)D. SECSTATE 61253
[1](#)E. CAIRO 965
[1](#)F. CAIRO 479
[1](#)G. 2006 CAIRO 3516

Classified by DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action cable. For action requested, see paragraph 11.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: On June 18, the Ambassador raised with Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit USG concern over continuing reports that Egypt is deporting Eritreans likely eligible for refugee protections to Eritrea. Aboul Gheit said that the GOE is facilitating UNHCR access to Eritreans in Egyptian custody but did not deny the reports, and stressed security concerns that Egypt faces from the Eritrean illegal migrant community. UNHCR Regional Representative Saad Al Attar has concluded that deportations have taken place, and that while the GOE has facilitated access to some Eritrean migrants, there are many more unaccounted for. Aboul Gheit called for UNHCR to more actively resettle Eritreans to ease the burden on Egypt, but Attar worried that a large resettlement program would spur even more migrants to seek to illegally reach Egypt. Egypt finds itself trapped between a continuing flow of African migrants illegally transiting Egypt to reach Israel and its international commitments to protect refugees. End summary.

MFA: No Denial, Stresses Security Concerns

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador called Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit on June 18 to express concern over reports that Egypt continues to deport Eritreans likely eligible for refugee protections from Egypt to Massawa, Eritrea. Noting appreciation for Aboul Gheit's reiteration of Egypt's commitment to protect refugees and for the GOE allowing UNHCR access to Eritreans in Egyptian detention, the Ambassador emphasized that reports of further deportations were troubling and continuing. Aboul Gheit reiterated that the GOE is facilitating UNHCR access to Eritreans in Egyptian custody, but did not deny the reports. He stressed that Egypt faced security concerns from the large flow of Eritrean illegal migrants and particularly from "criminal elements," citing the case of an Eritrean immigrant who beat and killed a 75-year-old woman in a Cairo neighborhood.

¶4. (C) Aboul Gheit asked for USG assistance to resettle some Eritreans illegally in Egypt to the U.S. or other third countries. He also said that UNHCR "should be more energetic" on the Eritrean issue, and that registering all Eritreans who come to Egypt as refugees and letting them remain in Egypt "is not the solution." Separately, the Canadian Ambassador told the Ambassador on June 18 that UNHCR had not taken Canada up on its offers to resettle some Eritreans in Canada. The Canadian, European Commission, British, and French missions have also demarched the GOE on this issue. (Comment: The GOE had denied UNHCR access to these Eritreans from February 27 until June 16.)

¶5. (C) Separately on June 18, MFA Spokesman Hossam Zaki told us that Egypt had originally intended to return the Eritreans without notifying UNHCR or the international community. When reports of deportations began circulating publicly, the GOE "ceased deportations" and gave UNHCR access, he said. He stressed security concerns - "Egypt has enough problems without adding refugees." The Eritreans illegally in Egypt, he said, "make our security services nervous."

UNHCR Accesses Some, But Deportations Continue

¶6. (SBU) UNHCR Regional Representative Saad Al Attar told the Ambassador on June 18 that the GOE had facilitated UNHCR access to 186 Eritreans in Aswan (44 of whom upon questioning turned out to be Ethiopian); however, based on a list of confirmed names of Eritreans detained in Egypt they had expected to find more. They found no Eritreans in Hurghada, and UNHCR Deputy Regional Representative Katharina Lumpp said that their request to access Eritreans held in Kanater prison in Cairo was denied due to "short notice." The prison authorities said that UNHCR would not have access to Kanater, nor to two other prisons in Alexandria and Qena where Eritreans were also reportedly held, until June 19 at the earliest.

¶7. (SBU) Al Attar said that, while information is hard to come by, he believed that Eritreans had been deported on flights from Aswan and Cairo. Lumpp told us on June 18 that male Eritreans were being transferred from Kanater prison for deportation, and that at least 30 more had been deported on a flight from Cairo on June 17. Heba Kassem from the NGO the Refugees Center for Human Rights also claimed on June 18 that about 120 Eritreans who had previously been detained in Hurghada were deported from Cairo airport on June 17, information she gathered from phone calls from the Eritreans.

Pull Factors and Resettlement Concerns

¶8. (SBU) Al Attar said that some of the Eritreans had received UNHCR refugee status in Sudan prior to coming to Egypt, and that for that group UNHCR was ready to facilitate returning them to Sudan and protecting them in refugee camps there. He said that UNHCR is willing to consider resettlement from Egypt in cases of illness or other hardship, but is concerned that a large resettlement program would increase the "pull factor" and cause even more migrants to come to Egypt. He noted that the draw of reports from Eritrean and other African migrants who have found a better life in Israel continue to attract migrants to Egypt, putting Egypt in a tough situation vis-a-vis its border with Israel.

¶9. (C) Al Attar claimed that UNHCR has previously accepted about 45 percent of Eritrean asylum-seekers as refugees, hinting that if the GOE cooperated it would have international blessing to deport the other 55 percent. However, Lumpp previously gave us contradictory information, saying that UNHCR in early 2008 was approving Eritrean asylum requests at a rate of 90 percent. She opined that this was one of the reasons the GOE cut off UNHCR's access to Eritreans on February 27, 2008.

Comment

¶10. (C) Egypt has been wrestling for several months with a surge in the number of Eritrean migrants to Egypt (refs E and F). This group comes on top of an existing large community of mostly Sudanese, but also other African, refugees and migrants, both resident in Egypt and transiting it to find a better life by illegally crossing Egypt's Sinai border with Israel. The "criminal element" problem that Aboul Gheit noted has also been an issue, with young Sudanese in particular forming gangs that have committed vandalism and violent acts in Cairo (ref G).

Action Requested

¶11. (C) The Foreign Minister has requested U.S. or international help with this refugee population. We ask that the Department take another look at possible options for assistance with resettlement.
SCOBAY